

May River cleanup, economic development top Bluffton Council's priority list

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Cleaning up the May River is once again a top priority for Bluffton Town Council following a Saturday retreat at the new law enforcement center.

Another top objective is the need to grow and diversify the town's economy, council members and town administrators said.

With a draft of a May River Watershed Action Plan expected next week, council members will need to do "heavy lifting" to implement the recommended strategies to reduce fecal colliform levels and restore shellfishing, resident Jimmy McIntire said.

"You are so much ahead of other places and truly have the opportunity to do something," he said. "Now's the time."

Mayor Lisa Sulka acknowledged tough choices would have to be made to fund the cleanup but promised results.

"I don't want to be (reactive) -- I want to be proactive," she said.

Town manager Anthony Barrett said council should also focus on creating an economic development policy to attract knowledge- and technology-based businesses. He said the policy should be a template for what will be required of businesses who request incentives from the town.

Sulka said the policy would be used to determine when the town enters into public/private partnerships.

"We're in a pretty special place and we should decide if (businesses) come here or not," Sulka said. "We should be more selective."

Councilman Fred Hamilton stressed the need for regional approaches to economic development.

Resident Larry Hughes said he was encouraged by the town's plan to approach future economic development selectively instead of with a "fast-track mentality".

"I think we have an opportunity to seize a point in time because of our growth ... and this search for a new identity," Hughes said. "One of the things we want to be known for is innovation and technology."

The retreat served as an update to last year's weekend-long strategic planning workshop at Palmetto Bluff that set long- and short-term goals.

This year, consultant Susan Harper surveyed council members and departments head to boil the results down to 22 critical projects in the coming year.

In addition to cleaning up the May and creating an economic development strategy, the list includes improving town parks, promoting affordable housing and finding grants and other sources of funding for town projects.

With the handful of residents who attended, council members also discussed how to better communicate with residents and encourage them to serve on town boards and commissions.